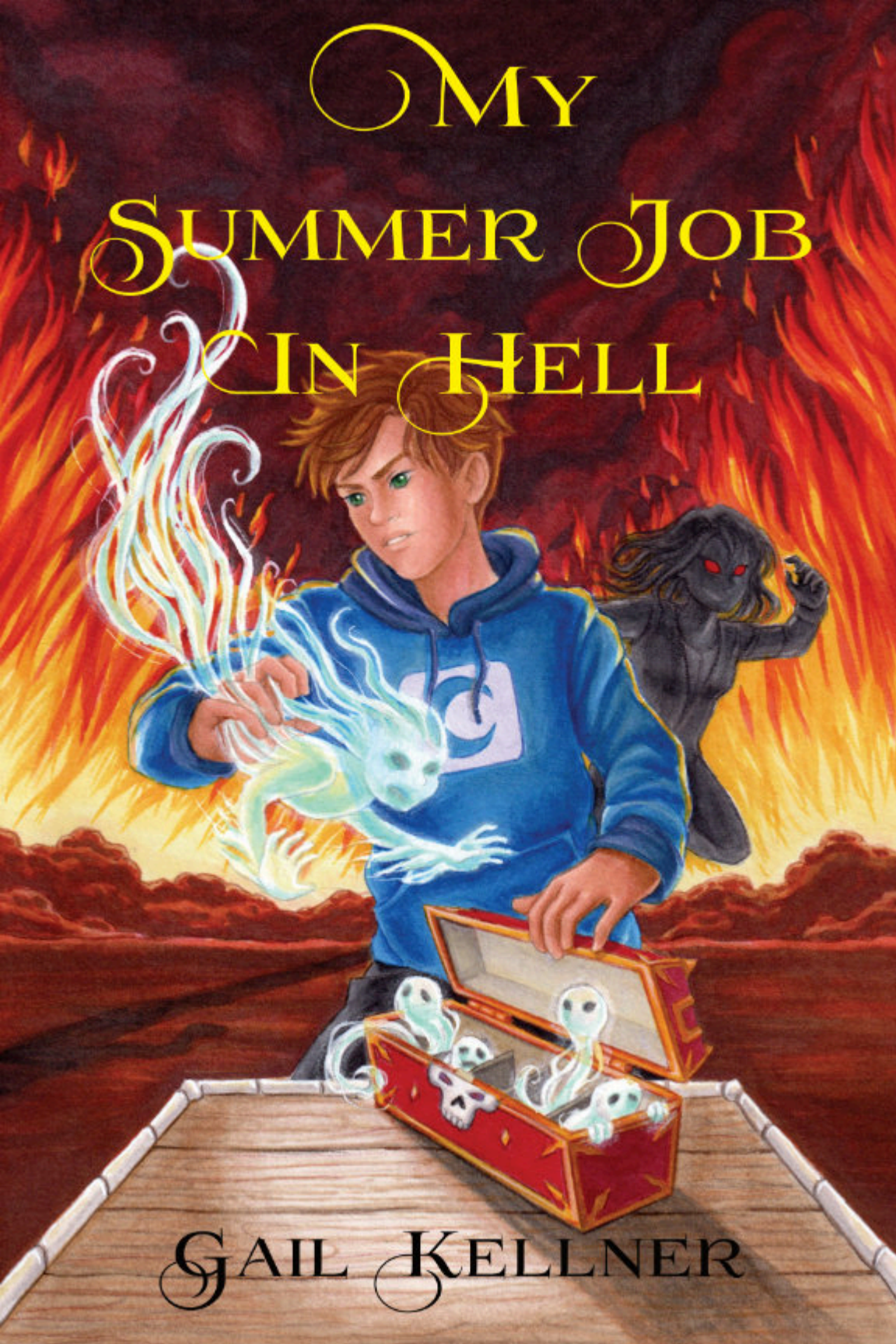


MY  
SUMMER JOB  
IN HELL



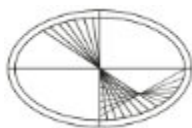
GAIL KELLNER



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SUMMER JOB  
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GAIL KELLNER



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# **My Summer Job in Hell**

*Gail Kellner*

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*Dedication*

This book is dedicated to my husband, Jim, who championed Cassidy; to my son Ben, who I adore; and to my son Justin, whose complaints about not being able to find a job so he should go work in Hell inspired this book.



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## CHAPTER ONE

I COULD HEAR the screaming all the way from my bedroom. High-pitched, shrill, and furious. The kinds of screams that make you think of werewolves and demons that steal your soul.

My feet were propped on my pillow as I lay in bed facing my Kate Upton swimsuit poster. I wished she were my girlfriend, but that didn't seem likely considering I was voted most likely to be overlooked by my high school class.

Okay, not really. For one thing, I'm a junior. I won't be voted most likely to be overlooked until next year.

Maybe I should introduce myself. My name is Fynn Hardin. I'm a sixteen-year-old guy with no girlfriend and no car. I have hair the color of dirt, a long face with a pointed chin, and a smattering of freckles. If this brings to mind an image of an adolescent giraffe, you're not far off.

I was throwing a ball against the wall and catching it with one hand. It's something I do to entertain myself. I've gotten pretty good at it. It helps block out the screaming.

"Noooooo! No! No! No!"

This ended in a screech so loud I thought my head was stuck inside a Boeing 747 engine. I sat up, grabbed my pillow from under my feet, and flopped back down, pressing it over my head. Which made me wonder—could I still catch the ball if I couldn't see, like, by using Spidey-sense or the Force or something?

*Thwack.*

Apparently not. I'd have to work on that.

"Fynn! Dinner!" I debated not going, but I was hungry, so I blew Kate a kiss and shuffled downstairs.

"Hi, Fynn." My mom was taking a chicken pot pie out of the oven, while my dad wrestled a screaming Madeline, aka Maddie, into her highchair. *Sweet.* I love chicken pot pie, so I slid into a chair and helped myself to a large portion. The smell of hot, delicious, mouth-watering chicken met my nose. Ahhh...

"Fynn!" Dad barked.

I jerked my head up. "What?"

"Could you help me here, please!" Maddie had her feet on the edge of her high chair, her fists of fury flailing around my dad's head and her little body

bending in an arc. I made a face at her, stuck out my tongue, crossed my eyes, and poked her in the stomach. She laughed and relaxed enough for my dad to pop her into her highchair. When she realized what just happened, she got ready to scream again, but I shook some Cheerios onto her tray and she brightened.

"Thanks, Fynn," Dad said, wiping the sweat off his forehead. Dad was ten years older than mom, and he always said that he totally lucked out when she married him. I could kind of see it. Dad's balding and has a belly, plus he works long hours and has no sense of humor. He's a salesman for a printer business.

"You know, you're very good with Maddie," Mom said. I could tell by the way they exchanged glances that something was up. Should I just pretend not to notice? Probably. I shoveled another forkful of chicken into my mouth. My dad made a sort of "hmmf"ing noise.

"Okay, what?" I put my fork down.

Mom cleared her throat. "We were thinking that for the summer you could hang out and take care of Maddie. You know, while I go to work to earn money for your college education."

I stared at her, then at my father, searching for confirmation that this was a joke. My dad smiled at me like this was some fantastic opportunity that I would be a fool not to jump at. My twelve-year-old brother, Kevin, looked at me and laughed. His mouth was full.

"Are you kidding?" I managed.

"No, actually we are not," Mom said.

"I'm getting a job for the summer. You know, so I can save money and buy a car and...stuff."

Maddie was born fifteen months ago. Last summer, Mom was on maternity leave and could look after her own baby. Now that she was back at work she wanted me to do it?

"It won't be so bad looking after your sister. She's a pretty easy baby," my dad said, as if I had not just witnessed the war to get her into her highchair.

"Seriously? How am I supposed to save for a car if I'm running around after Maddie all day? Are you going to pay me for my services?"

"Because everyone..." They both started talking at the same time, so Dad stopped, nodded at Mom, and said, "You go."

"Because we're a family, and everyone has to do their part. We can save money by not sending Maddie to day care for the summer. Money which we can then use to send you to college." She brushed a lock of her cinnamon-colored hair out of her face. She works nights as an ICU nurse at a local hospital and was always tired. "You can borrow my car when I'm not using it. They'll be plenty of time for you to go out with your friends."

“It’s not a bad deal,” my dad said, as if he were trying to convince himself.

I sighed. My mom drove a ten-year-old minivan. I bet girls would be falling all over themselves to be seen with a guy who drove his mom’s minivan.

There was another reason I really needed a job, but I didn’t want to tell my parents. Three months ago, they had given me a line of credit on one of their cards for “emergencies”—gas and school expenses. Well, define “emergency.” Is it an emergency if all of my friends are playing the same video game and I am in imminent danger of becoming more of a social misfit than I am already? I thought so. Anyway, somehow I managed to spend \$400 on Steam. Yeah, I know. But it’s not really my fault. Where did my parents get this misguided idea that I was responsible?

Obviously, the credit card people wanted their money. I had been yanking the bill out of the mailbox before my parents got to it so far, but obviously that wasn’t going to work for much longer. I wanted to get rid of the debt before my parents noticed, or at least pay it down enough so that the total could be construed as gas and school expenses.

I have to admit, I also felt a twinge of resentment about this whole babysitting idea. Was it my fault they had a baby last year? No, it was not. So why was my summer going to be sacrificed? Because it was convenient for them?

“I didn’t ask for you to have a baby,” I said, almost instantly regretting it.

“Well, if that’s how you feel, I’ll just quit my job to take care of the three of you. Of course, next year when you want to go to college, I won’t be able to help you.” She gestured at me with her fork, and the expression on her face said she would have cheerfully stabbed me with it.

“You know, Fynn, sometimes you have to step up. You have to make sacrifices for your family,” Dad said.

*Peace and quiet*, I thought. It seemed to me that’s what I was sacrificing, not to mention steady income and self-esteem. Instead I grunted. Kevin looked at me, suppressing a giggle, which brought up an excellent point.

“What’s Kevin sacrificing, exactly?” Kevin kicked me under the table.

“Don’t you worry. Kevin will have responsibilities as well.” Kevin stuck his tongue out at me. Maddie waved her spoon around and flicked chicken pot pie all over the table. My mom sighed and got up to get a cloth. Maddie smiled, pleased with herself, and banged her sippy cup on the tray of her highchair.

“There’s a summer job fair this weekend at school. I was planning on going.” I glanced at Mom and Dad. This was the delicate moment, where my summer and my self-respect hung in the balance. Were they going to let go of this idea that I would be Maddie’s babysitter so I could go be a normal high school student with a summer job, meeting summer girls, and saving for summer cars?

“Fynn...” Mom appeared to be wrestling with saying what she really wanted to say, versus trying to be supportive. She sighed. “If you want to get a job so that you can contribute to your college fund, that would be...okay. I mean, we could work around it. You could get a job in the evenings or something.”

Great. My parents were on board with my summer job search. The fact they thought I'd be sacking away money for college instead of a car was an issue I could deal with later. Right now, I looked forward to finding a summer job.

## CHAPTER TWO

I KNEW THE job fair was at 8:00. I mean, seriously, who has a summer job fair at eight o'clock in the morning on a Saturday? Franklin Regional High School, that's who. My plan was to get there early, scope out all the jobs, and then pick two or three of the easiest ones and hope for the best.

I set my alarm. I know I did. I don't know why it didn't go off. When the first glimmer of consciousness pierced my sleeping brain at 10:30 a.m., my first thought was, *It's so light out*. Then I woke up and thought, *Shit!* I threw on the clothes I was wearing yesterday, conveniently lying crumpled up next to my bed, and ran out the door as fast as I could. The job fair only lasted until 11:00 a.m.

By the time I got there, the gym was nearly deserted. The only people left were the faculty monitors and the last of the job fair employers, who were throwing applications and poster board into folders and making a beeline for the exit. Mrs. Hinson and Mr. Clark were sucking on paper cups of cold coffee, waiting impatiently for the job fair to end so they could go about the rest of their weekend. They looked at me with derision. I know what they were thinking, that I was a screwup who couldn't even show up to a job fair on time. It was sort of true, but there was no reason to be so judgmental about it.

I glanced out the windows of the gym and saw my friend Josh outside, so I went to join him. It was a beautiful day in mid-May, one of the first nice days we had. It had been a rainy, cold, and depressing spring, but today was gorgeous. The sun was shining, bathing everyone in warmth and happiness. Birds were singing and flowers were cautiously poking their heads up through the sandy soil. A few clumps of students were standing around enjoying the weather, talking about whatever awesome opportunity had undoubtedly just unfolded before them.

"Hey," I said, without enthusiasm.

"Hey, where were you?" Josh said. "The job fair's mostly over."

"I know. I think I accidentally set my alarm for 7 p.m. instead of 7 a.m."

"Bummer. Don't despair. You can always go directly to the job sites."

"Yeah, I guess. How 'bout you? Did you get a job?"

"Yup. Computer Tech hired me on the spot." He flashed someone's business card and grinned.

“Of course you did,” I said a bit sourly. Josh was brilliant. No matter what problem someone was having with a computer, he could always figure it out. Every time. It was simultaneously both really annoying and really convenient.

Just then, my cell phone pinged with a text message from my mom. *How was the job fair?* I winced. Should I just tell her I slept through it? For a second, I thought maybe it wouldn't be so bad hanging out with Maddie all summer. Then I remembered my \$400 debt. I imagined the lecture I was in for when they found out I used their credit card for video games. Not to mention what a schmuck I was for missing the job fair in the first place.

My fingers hovered over my phone. *Great!* I texted. Hopefully, she wouldn't ask me too many follow-up questions. Thankfully, my phone remained silent.

I stood and wondered what to do with myself. I needed a job. I needed a job so I could pay my debt and get a car. I needed a car so I could get a hot girlfriend, because what hot girl dates a guy with no car?

Josh's mom pulled up, so Josh nodded at me and said, “Don't sweat it. You'll find something.”

“Yeah. I know,” I said, even though I was picturing myself spooning strained peas into Maddie's mouth and being single for the rest of my life. I waved halfheartedly and watched them drive away.

I wandered around aimlessly, not wanting to go home. Mom would frown, ask me if I had gotten a job, and give me a look of fatalistic disappointment. It occurred to me I had forgotten a book I needed for a paper that was due Monday, so I tried the front door. Locked. I tried the side door and the door to the cafeteria but found them locked as well. I walked around to the gym. Locked. However, the small gym, the one that's mostly used to store mats and deflated volleyballs, was unlocked. *Sweet.*

Walking down the hallways to my locker, I grabbed the book and shut the door as gently as possible. It made a crashing metal-on-metal sound anyone left in the building would've heard. I froze, expecting Principal Jones to come barreling around the corner, shaking his finger at me and yelling, “Hardin!” Not that I ever had that happen. But all was quiet.

I don't really know what I was thinking after that. It was weird being in my high school when it was empty. I peered into some of my classrooms, tried the door of the Main Office, found a few pencils, and basically wandered around. Lost in thought, I read posters I didn't usually have the time or inclination to read. The drama department was putting on a revival of *Into the Woods*. Baseball tryouts were next Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday. The jazz band needed a guitarist. I wish I played guitar, but I had never quite gotten around to that.

I came to an elevator to the right of the main stairwell. It was usually

locked, but for some reason it was standing open. *Weird*. So I got in it. Why not, right? I stabbed the button for the basement, thinking I'd find a bunch of cool old stuff stashed down there. The elevator dropped and started to descend. And descend. And descend. I swear I was in the elevator for ten minutes. My heart hammered in my chest and sweat ran down my neck as I stabbed the "stop" button, then all the other buttons, but nothing happened. I couldn't breathe and thought I might pass out when the elevator finally stopped. So happy to be out of my little metal prison, I damn near threw myself out of there.

Half a second later, I turned around to get back into the elevator. Sitting in front of me was the most bizarre secretary I'd ever seen—assuming that's what she was. She had blueish skin, like she hadn't seen the light of day in about a thousand years, and lime green hair, like her punk phase had lasted her entire life. She was wearing thick eyeglasses and large hoop earrings, and she was talking on the phone. She held up a finger to indicate she would be with me in a minute. I tried to shake my head as a way of saying, *I don't need anything, lady*, but too late. She hung up with whoever she was talking to and said, "Welcome to Hell. Can I help you?"

I stared at her, open-mouthed. "Uh...what?"

"I said, welcome to Hell. What can I help you with?"

Like most people, I had imagined what Hell would be like from time to time. I always thought it would be like a dungeon, with molten lava coursing through it in a river and the worst people humanity had to offer falling into it, screaming. I did not expect a receptionist.

"What...how did I get here?"

"I don't know, hon. You took the elevator, I expect." She looked me up and down, taking in my converse all-stars, my wrinkled t-shirt, and my cargo pants. I know, cargo pants went out of style a long time ago—I like the pockets, okay?

"More importantly, how do I get back out?" What if I was trapped in Hell? I couldn't breathe again and needed to sit down.

"The same way you got here—on the elevator." She said this as if explaining it to a kindergartner or to someone who had just recently come out of a coma. Feeling a smidge better, I glanced around, curious.

The receptionist was sitting at a normal-looking glass-topped desk with two chairs facing her. Behind her were bookshelves, and underneath everything was a tasteful-yet-bland beige carpet with a dotted pattern on it. It could have been any office in America. Further down the hall to the left there seemed to be a conference room, and to the right was a brick archway that led to a tunnel. Some kind of subway system?

"Did you need something?" The lady asked pointedly.

“I need a job,” I blurted out without thinking.

She brightened. “Well, you’ve come to the right place. We need help.”

“You do? Hell is hiring?”

She smiled, sort of a wicked smile, and said, “We sure are. Here.” She rummaged around in her desk and put a piece of paper on a clipboard, stuck a pen to it, and handed it to me. “Just fill that out and give it back to me. I’ll give it to my boss.”

“You mean Satan, right?”

She smiled and shook her head. “No one calls him that. You can sit there,” she said, pointing to one of the chairs.

“Uh, I don’t...I won’t be...you know...” I mimed using a pitchfork. “Torturing anyone, will I?”

“No. That’s an upper-level position. You would be strictly entry-level.”

“Oh. Great.” I took the clipboard and sat down. It wouldn’t hurt to look over the application, would it? I have to admit, I was curious. What sort of jobs were there in Hell? The first part was all the standard stuff—name, address, phone number, emergency contact.

I had a sudden thought. “Um, I was interested in summer employment. Are there summer jobs here?”

“Oh, yes. We usually hire several high school and college students to work for us during the busy season.”

I wondered what made summer “the busy season,” but I focused on the application.

*What skills do you have? What skills did I have? Not many. I was pretty good at Minecraft. Employment history? None, I wrote. Already it was looking unlikely they would hire me anyway. What special talents or abilities do you have that would benefit Hell? Was this a trick question? I wrestled with that for a while, and finally I wrote, “I’m a people person.”*

I gave it back to the lime-haired lady. She glanced it over and said, “Okay, thank you...Fynn. How many hours a week are you looking for?”

“Well...thirty to forty a week, I guess. Just for the summer, though.”

She nodded again. “Okay. My name is Dorothy. Is this a good number to call you at?” She indicated my cell phone number. I nodded. “We’ll be in touch.”

“So, I just hit the button to...you know. Get back to earth?”

“Yup, same way you came.”

“O-kaaaay.” I stepped back into the elevator, wondering if they would hire me and if I would want to work there if they did. But at least I had an application in somewhere.



## CHAPTER THREE

**M**ONDAY MORNING, I woke up at 7:03. School started at 7:19. Sixteen minutes. Totally doable. I grabbed my jeans—very neatly thrown over the top of the dresser—pulled on a cleanish shirt, stopped in the bathroom, and grabbed an apple on my way through the kitchen. Our cat, Shadow Chaser, came out from under the kitchen table and wrapped around my feet, so I nearly tripped.

My mom had just gotten home from work, and my dad was just leaving. He passed Maddie off to her, kissed her on the cheek, and drove off. Mom got started on feeding Maddie and then noticed me.

“Fynn, aren’t you going to eat breakfast?” Mom asked as she tried to feed Maddie a spoonful of vanilla yogurt. Maddie tried to push her tray away from her chubby little body with both hands and said, “Out! Out!”

“No time, Mom. I gotta go.”

I heard Maddie’s telltale shriek as I jogged down Ellis Road. We only lived about a mile and a half away from Franklin Regional High School, thank goodness. If I could break a four-minute mile, I’d be right on time.

“Hey!” A black pickup truck pulled up next to me. I glanced over and discovered Josh grinning at me like he just won the lottery.

“Hey! Did you just get this?” I yanked open the passenger side door and climbed in.

“Yeah. My parents lent me the money, now that I’m working for a living.” He smiled.

“Sweet!” It was, too. I was pretty sure my face turned all shades of green. Why couldn’t my parents be cool like Josh’s? There was no way my parents were going to buy me a car. Part of me knew Josh’s parents didn’t mind lending him the money because he would pay it back. But you’d think my parents could at least sympathize with my plight as a non-car-owning student in high school. If I had a car, I wouldn’t be on the verge of being late every day, now would I?

We managed to walk in just as the bell was ringing. On my way in, I saw Amanda Kaneko, a totally hot Asian chick I sat behind in American History.

“Hi!” I said, too loudly. She glanced around until her gaze landed on me. She looked faintly puzzled.

“Do I know you?”

“Yeah. American History, second period?”

She hesitated, then nodded and smiled, but I could tell she still had no idea who I was. So I just nodded and said, “See ya.”

High school sucks.

The rest of the day passed by uneventfully. After school, I learned Josh had to go straight to work and couldn’t give me a ride home.

“But, I’ll swing by your house tomorrow to pick you up. 7:05 a.m. sharp! Or I’m driving off without you!”

“Yeah, I’ll be ready.” I walked home, pushed my way in the front door, and discovered the house was unusually quiet. Where was everyone?

Kevin didn’t get out of middle school until 2:32. He had to ride the bus, so he didn’t get home until almost 3:00. I peeked in my parent’s bedroom, wondering if Mom was taking a nap, but she wasn’t there. She must have taken Maddie somewhere.

The landline rang. I walked over and saw “Free Rein Credit” on the caller ID, so I grabbed it.

“Hello?”

“May I speak to Mr. Hardin, please?”

“Yeah?” I lowered my voice an octave to sound more like Dad.

“Is this Mr. Hardin?”

“Yeah, this is Mr. Hardin.” Well, I was *a* Mr. Hardin.

“Mr. Hardin, my name is Colton Reed with Free Rein Credit. I’m sure you know that your son,” there was a pause here, as if he were frantically searching his paperwork to find out what my name might be, “Fynn, has rung up debt on his Student Freedom card. We were just calling to let you know, and to ask when we might expect payment.”

*Shit.* “Oh, of course, we know. Ha ha, silly Fynn. Uh...how long do we have to pay it?”

“Mr. Hardin, the loan is already two months behind.”

“Right. Well, I firmly believe Fynn should pay that himself. I will not bail him out. Look, I...I mean he should have a job in a few weeks.”

A sigh on the other end. “Mr. Hardin, I would hate to have to report this to credit agencies. I am only giving you as much leeway as I am because of your prior credit history with us. But I can only delay so long.”

I calculated quickly. I had a few dollars left over from my birthday. “I can pay thirty dollars now, and then I...I mean Fynn...can make payments starting

June 15th.” This was wildly optimistic, considering I had so far only applied to one place, but whatever. I didn’t even want to think about what would happen when my parents found out what I had spent \$400 on. They would look at each other, then at me, and instead of disappointment or shock, they would have a look of resignation on their faces, as if they always knew I would be a screwup and I was just living up to their expectations.

A sigh on the other end. “Thirty dollars now?”

“Well, I have cash. Do you take cash?” I knew they didn’t take cash over the phone, but I thought they had a branch office downtown. “I can make a payment tomorrow in the Franklin branch on West Street.”

“I’m making a note of this in the computer.”

“Great!” I said.

“Okay. Thirty dollars now and then payments starting June fifteenth. Thank you, Mr. Hardin.”

“Yes, sounds good. Have a great day!”

I disconnected.

I seriously needed to find a job.



## CHAPTER FOUR

**O**KAY, I'M NOT an idiot. Usually, anyway. I knew Hell would be a terrible place to work. I knew that. Everyone knows that. So, in the weeks that followed, I applied for every single summer job I could think of. I applied for retail jobs, restaurant jobs, janitorial jobs, stock boy jobs, but I heard the same thing, over and over.

"Sorry, but we've already hired our summer crew."

I did find a few places that took my application and said, "We'll be in touch." One was a Chinese restaurant run by immigrants with a sketchy reputation as far as what went into the Pork Fried Rice. The owner smiled at me in such a nice way, and I think she said, "We call you."

Another was a retail store, Big Bargains. The manager looked at me skeptically but promised he'd look over my application and call if anything came up.

I was batting a thousand.

I applied as a summer camp counselor, too. It wasn't what I was hoping for, but weren't girls often employed as summer camp counselors? Cute girls? Girls in bikinis? It was worth a shot.

As May dragged into June, my mom started talking like it was all settled. I would be Maddie's full-time de-facto babysitter. "Fynn, I want you to go over this stacking game with Maddie—it's good for her fine motor skills." "I just got a cool new app that teaches language skills. Come look at this." "Fynn, you know Maddie likes strained sweet potatoes for lunch." And on and on.

I hadn't heard from anyone—not one place I applied had called me back. It was starting to mess with my self-esteem. I know I had no job experience, but how much know-how did it take to stock shelves? Why didn't anyone want me?

I paid my thirty dollars to the woman sitting behind the counter at Free Rein. She looked at me like she had just found me under her refrigerator, rotted and shriveled. "First payment, June 15<sup>th</sup>."

"Great. Uh, is there a grace period?"

She glared at me. "Five days."

"Thank you."

The first Friday in June was one of those perfect near-summer days that people write poems about. The sun dappled the earth with puddles of light

and warmth. There was an optimism in the air, a promise of better weather and carefree afternoons spent napping in the sun. I finished school and went home—I wanted to hang out with Josh, but he was already working his summer job at Computer Tech. I threw my backpack on the kitchen table and started poking around in the cabinets for something to eat.

“Fynn? Is that you?”

“Yeah, hi Mom.” Why couldn’t we have decent chips for once? Why did we always have to buy store-brand chips? Oh, well. I ripped open the package and wandered into the living room.

Mom was in her pajamas, and Maddie was concentrating on a puzzle. She had one piece gripped in her chubby fist and was studying the puzzle board. Carefully, she placed the piece near the border, almost perfectly. She looked up at me and grinned. I had to hand it to her—she was a smart little kid. I knelt on the rug next to her and handed her another piece.

Just then my cell rang, so I dug it out of my pocket. It said “Dorothy” and a number I didn’t recognize. I tried to think who I knew named Dorothy when it occurred to me—Hell’s receptionist. With a bit of trepidation, I answered.

“Hello?”

“Fynn Hardin?”

“Yeah?” Oops. I cleared my throat. “Yes, this is he.” I could see Mom watching me so I went up the stairs to my room.

“This is Dorothy Leningrad, the Office Manager from Hell. How are you today, Mr. Hardin?”

“I’m go...well. I’m well. How are you?”

“I’m doing fine. Thank you for asking. I believe I have good news for you, Mr. Hardin. We’d like to offer you a job.”

“Oh? I mean, great! That’s great. Uh...so, what sort of job?”

“We’d like you to come to Orientation, which is a week from tomorrow, and we’ll assign jobs and set your hours then. Sound good?”

“Sounds great! Thank you! Thank you very much.” I clicked off.

I ran downstairs into the living room, where Mom was looking at me expectantly. “Who was that?” she asked.

“I just got a summer job!” I crowed.

“Oh.” She glanced at Maddie. “That’s great. I’m happy for you.”

I felt a pang of guilt. “Uh...we’ll be okay, right?”

She smiled and said, “Of course we will. We’ll figure it out. Kevin can keep an eye on Maddie a little if I’m right upstairs sleeping, you can do it occasionally, I’ll take vacation time—we’ll work it out. I’m happy for you. Congratulations.”

So, that’s how I got my summer job in Hell. Next up: Orientation.

## CHAPTER FIVE

I SPENT THE next week filled with a combination of excitement and dread. I was going to work in Hell! Oh, crap—I was going to work in Hell. Well, maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Wait, what am I, nuts? Well, it couldn't hurt to show up on Saturday and find out what it's all about.

Saturday arrived. I slammed my hand down on my alarm clock and sat up, knowing I couldn't be late. Dorothy said to arrive at 9 a.m. sharp, and I was determined not to be a screwup. I put on my nicest chinos and a button-down shirt, and I made my way back to Franklin Regional High School. Naturally, every door was locked. It was Saturday morning, and nothing was going on at the school that would've led to a stray door being open. I tried the front doors, the side doors, the door hidden under the stairwell to the cafeteria—all locked. And before you ask the obvious, yes, of course I tried the door to the small gym. It was locked too.

I was on the edge of panic. I couldn't be late on my first day, and it was almost 9:00. Trying every door, I was literally tearing around like a madman—anything to find a way in. I was just about to give up and resign myself to a summer of loneliness and diapers when I saw a window on the first floor just slightly ajar. Now how to get in? I searched for something to stand on, saw a trash can tucked under an overhang, and pushed it under the window. It would be just my luck to get stuck. Then someone would call the police about some kid with his butt hanging out of a window at the high school, and by Monday I would have to move to avoid the ridicule. Luckily, I'm pretty skinny and slid through.

I ran to the elevator near the stairwell, and thank goodness it was standing open, waiting, like an invitation. As soon as I got in it started to descend.

"Hello, Fynn. Nice to see you again." Dorothy smiled at me. Today her hair was blue, probably to match her skin.

"Hi, Dorothy." I tried to surreptitiously sniff under my armpit to make sure I didn't smell, and I followed her down a dark hallway to a large auditorium. To my surprise, I was not the only one here for Orientation. There were about fifty kids seated in the blue velvet seats, looking around, talking to each other in that way that people who have just met do—anxiously and eager to be liked.

I took a seat next to a tall redheaded girl and said, "So, you come here

often?" She rolled her eyes and immediately started talking to the person on her other side. *Nice going, Fynn*, I thought. I really had to brush up on pick-up lines. As I was mulling over what I should've said, an overweight, balding man appeared on the stage in front of us.

"Your attention, please." He grabbed the microphone, which screeched in protest. People started nudging each other and quieted down.

"Good morning, and welcome to Hell! This is going to be a very exciting summer. My name is Marshall Dodd, and I run the Soul Destination Department here in Hell. Now, I'm sure you're all wondering what you're going to be doing. We've sorted you as best we can into departments where we feel your skills and abilities will be put to the best use. We have openings in the kitchen, transportation, sorting, packing, and admissions. At the end of this brief introduction, I'll identify what departments you'll be working in, and you'll finish your orientation there. But first, I'd like to introduce you to a very important being here in Hell—indeed, probably *the* most important being. Would you please give a warm welcome to The Prince of Darkness himself, Lucifer!"

We all leaned forward, curious, as the first few notes of "Sympathy for the Devil" played over the loudspeaker. I must admit, I expected to see a horned giant blowing smoke out of his nose, twirling a pitchfork, kind of like a mutant minotaur. Instead, the most handsome man I had ever seen in my life appeared and walked confidently to the podium. Lucifer wore a black suit, and his hair was neatly trimmed. He was tall and moved with an easy grace. He shook hands with Mr. Dodd and then held his arms out as if extending an embrace to us all.

"I would like to personally welcome you to Hell. Call me Luke. I hope you'll find Hell is a great place to work. If you have any difficulties, I hope you'll feel like you can come to me. We want you to be happy, efficient workers. Hell is a busy place. We process over half a million souls a year, and you'll be an integral part of that."

As he went on, there was something absolutely mesmerizing about him. I looked around and saw that we were all enthralled, both males and females leaning forward in their seats, slack-jawed, elbows on their knees and staring in some kind of hypnotic trance. He was pleasant, and the words were welcoming, but at the same time there was a faint malevolence, a coldness behind his friendly eyes.

He didn't talk very long—I got the sense he had better things to do than welcome new employees to Hell. He hurried off, and as soon as he did the spell was broken. People relaxed back in their seats and again looked faintly disinterested. Mr. Dodd took the stage again.



“I would like to introduce you to the department managers. These are the people you will report to directly. Our culinary director, Ms. Analisa Santiago.” In all my fantasy novels, women are always oversexed, half-dressed creatures nearly bursting at the seams of their suggestive clothing. But this was a stout, middle-aged witch wearing a heavy hooded caftan. Her eyebrows almost met in the middle of her face, right above her hooked nose.

“Transportation manager, Mr. Roger Abbet.” He had white hair, smoothly tied into a ponytail, and a stubble of white on his chin. His lined face was highlighted by his ice-blue eyes. “Soul sorting, Mr. Billy Pae.” A slim man with no mouth stood up and waved. I didn’t know what happened to his mouth at the time—I learned later he lost it in a bet with the next guy to stand up.

“Security, Mr. Andre Markov.” A gigantic man, probably seven feet tall and as wide as your average subcompact car, grunted at us. He was carrying an ax that was the size of a bus. I was hoping I wasn’t in security. “Finally, Soul Destination, that’s me, and we’ve already met.” He smiled at us like this was really funny.

They sorted us into our departments, so we could get oriented to whatever job we were going to do. I wound up in Soul Destination. There were three of us—me, an overweight kid named Tom, and a girl with dyed black hair, a nose ring, and a tattoo on her neck. I wondered if she was single.

Dutifully, we followed Mr. Dodd along on the tour. The auditorium and the cafeteria made up two halves of a circular whole. They formed a central hub, with corporate offices and reception around the outer circle. They were clean, modern, and sterile—about what you’d find in any office in America. A small bay just outside of the cafeteria was where transportation was housed.

Dodd punched a passcode and a small, driverless taxi appeared before us. It was just big enough for the four of us to squish into, with me and Tom facing Dodd and the girl, who I learned was named Jenna. It was so small our knees were almost touching, which was about as awkward as it sounds. Dodd punched some numbers in the keypad by the door, and immediately a thrust sent us off.

“These hovercrafts are so efficient. Before we had these, we had an ancient railway system, and it took almost a whole day to get from one side of Hell to the other. Now, we can do it in about an hour. And the railway was always breaking down. I had one orientee who got stuck on the train in a really remote area, and a week went by before anyone noticed she was gone.” He saw our faces and said, “Oh, but don’t worry, that doesn’t happen anymore.”

We zipped along so fast I couldn’t see anything—just a blur of dirt brown. Finally, we stopped at central Soul Destination.

I'm sure you're wondering, as I did, that if Hell has been around since the beginning of time and a certain percentage of people go there after they die, then Hell must be really crowded. Where do they put all these people? Hell is really big, but even so—if it's been in operation for thousands of years, there must be millions of people down there.

The answer is no there isn't. Hell has six levels, according to how dreadful people were on earth—the farther down you go, the worse humanity is. The outermost level has your internet trolls, tax evaders, the chronically late, and people who leave their Christmas lights up until April. The next level has adulterers, drug addicts, and the like. The third level houses thieves, armed robbers, and narcissists. On the fourth level, you start to get really unpleasant people—people who were cruel to animals, stalkers, and people who committed manslaughter. The fifth level is where murderers, pedophiles, and rapists go, and the final level is where they put the absolute worst of the worst—serial killers, mass murderers, and tyrannical dictators like Hitler and Mao Zedong.

So, everyone gets a sentence in Hell depending on their level of offense. The level one people get a year, or a few years, where they suffer depending on their crime. It varies, but having people being bitten by mosquitoes and flies constantly, keeping them cold, and keeping them hungry are some favorites. The lower the level, the worse the torture. The sixth level is probably closest to what you think of as Hell—people are burned in hellfire, drowned in lava, etcetera. Lucifer himself takes care of the sixth level.

Obviously, for torture to work effectively, you need a body. Otherwise, there is no pain or suffering. So everyone brings their corporeal body with them to Hell to be subjected to whatever stress has been deemed appropriate. When they have served out their sentence, the bodies are burned, and the ashes are part of the dirt that coats the floors. The souls are packaged up neatly, put in boxes, and shipped off to their final destination. Some of them eventually go to Heaven, some to Purgatory, and some return to earth. A few are dissolved and their energy returns to the universe.

My job would be to package up the souls, put them in boxes, and label them according to destination. Mr. Dodd gave us our schedules. I would be working Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. My first day would be the Monday following the end of the school year, and I could quit August 27th—two days before school started. I looked forward to my first day at work.

## CHAPTER SIX

SCHOOL ROCKETED TO its usual end-of-the-year conclusion. I spent my time catching up on all the work I never got around to before final grades were due. Most teachers were pretty accepting of my lame excuses, but one, Mr. Ericson, peered out at me over the rims of his glasses and grunted.

“Is there a reason you were not able to complete your project on time, Mr. Hardin?”

“Uh, well, you know my mom works nights and she had a baby last year, and sometimes I have to take care of my sister.” I smiled in what I hoped was a winning fashion. It worked for every other teacher. I had no reason to doubt it would work now.

“Really?” He gestured with his pen at a desk that was usually occupied by Michaela Cleary. I looked at her desk and looked back at Mr. Ericson. I had no idea what he was getting at.

“Did you know Ms. Cleary had a baby last July and still managed to turn in her project on time? Furthermore, she got one of the top grades in all my classes. What was your excuse again, Mr. Hardin?” His eyes bored into me, daring me to make up some bullshit excuse. Damn Michaela Cleary and her over-achievement.

“My excuse is...uh, lack of character?”

At this, Mr. Ericson laughed. His eyes crinkled at the corners, and for a second he looked like a nice guy instead of the history taskmaster that he actually was. He took off his glasses, pinched his nose, and then put his glasses back on and looked at me.

“You do have some charm, I’ll give you that. If you turn in your project by Monday, you can earn half credit. By Monday! No more excuses.”

“Yes, sir, by Monday. Thank you.” Great, now I had four days to throw together a project that I should’ve spent weeks working on and for only half credit.

I spent that weekend feverishly working on my history project. Originally I was going to do an Allied Forces vs. Nazi Chess set, but then I realized that would take way too long forming all the little model chessmen. So instead, I wrote a journal from the perspective of a soldier in the trenches during WWII, loosely based on the movie, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. I was in a hurry. It

wasn't great, but I got it done, although Mr. Ericson rolled his eyes at me when I turned it in.

Free Rein credit called, and I answered it before my parents could. I assured them I—Fynn—had a job, although I didn't mention where it was, and said his first payment would be forthcoming after his first paycheck. This would make it only slightly late.

"We will report this to the credit agencies if we don't get the payment by June 15<sup>th</sup>." The disembodied voice hissed into the phone. Okay, so with the grace period I had until June twentieth. I could totally do that.

Before I knew it, it was the last day of school, and people were hugging while girls were carrying on about staying in touch. C'mon, we all have cell phones. You're gonna be texting these people forty times a day. Making my way past the parking lot, I started my walk home. I could've taken the bus, but I would be surrounded by freshmen and other nerds with no cars. So I walked instead. I wasn't even a quarter of a mile away when Josh pulled up in his pickup truck.

"Need a ride?" He grinned and leaned out his window.

Josh got all the breaks.

A small part of me knew Josh actually worked hard for what he got, but the rest of me shoved that thought out of my head and wondered why Josh was so freakin' lucky. Why couldn't I be lucky?

Josh dropped me off, and I went up the steps and into the kitchen. There was an end-of-the-year party later, and I was thinking of a nap. I grabbed a bag of chips—naps require a full stomach—and threw myself onto the sofa. I was just about to crash when Kevin came home. He threw his backpack down and started to head up to his room.

"What's the matter? You're looking a little down for someone with the whole summer ahead of him." He looked down at his feet and shrugged.

"It's nothing. I'm fine, just tired. I had a final today."

"Jesus, they have those in middle school now?"

Kevin nodded and yawned. "Yeah. I'm gonna lie down for a bit."

I watched him as he mounted the stairs and disappeared into his room. I thought he looked down, but I chalked it up to him thinking he didn't do well on the final.

That night I went to a party at the home of a girl Josh knew peripherally from Calculus. It was a good party, although I stayed out too late, and when I woke up in the morning my head was pounding. I spent the day recovering, mostly lying on the couch and eating cheese snaps until my mother yelled at me to find something productive to do. I said I would clean my room, and I did, for a few minutes. Then I stretched out on my bed and played video games.

Sunday passed by in a blur—it was a graduation party for my cousin Tim. His mom was my dad’s sister, and we were pretty close. He was going to go to college out of state. Tim had red cheeks and red hair and freckles. He was wearing a baseball cap because he tended to burn in the sun.

“Did you find a job yet?” he asked.

“Yup.” I felt no further elaboration was necessary. Weren’t all summer jobs pretty much the same?

“Okay. Where?”

“Hell.”

He laughed. “No, really. Where are you working?”

“Hell.”

“All right, fine, don’t tell me.”

“Seriously. Somehow I got a job in Hell.”

He looked at me like I was nuts. “Yeah, I’m going to college in Hell.”

I gave up and shrugged. “Just kidding. I’m working at McDonald’s.”

“Oh, so you are working in Hell.” He laughed, I laughed, and that was the end of that.

Before I knew it, it was Monday morning. I got up on time and got dressed in my cargo pants, a long sleeve shirt, and work boots. Only the boots were really required—just in case of sparks.

I went to the high school. Once again, I had trouble finding a way in. Finally, I found a window cracked open. I thrust it open as far as I dared, and then I propped it open with a pencil. I would need to go back later and try to disguise it so that it looked closed, but since I was going to need some way to get in four days a week, I might as well try to set something up for myself. Anyway, I shimmied in and then took the elevator to Hell.

“Fynn! Nice to see you,” Dorothy said as the elevator doors slid open. Today she had striped hair—wide Rainbow Brite stripes of pink, purple, and orange. Her lipstick was red and her skin was lavender.

“Hi, Dorothy.”

“Is this your first day?” she asked.

“Yeah. I’m a little nervous.”

“You’re going to do fine. You’ll need to take a hovercraft...” She pointed somewhere behind me with a pencil, “and enter 9A on the keypad. Soul Destination is department nine, A level. Got it?”

“9A. Yeah, I got it. Thank you.”

There were a few other people waiting in line for a hovercraft. I stood behind a tall woman with dark brown hair. She glanced at me, gave a lukewarm smile, and then turned back around.

*Hmmf. Nice to meet you, too.*

I took a seat in the hovercraft. It was metal and shaped like a bullet. My fingers fumbled for the keypad and I entered 9A. Almost immediately the hovercraft took off. I gripped the edge of the seat cushion to keep from falling over.

Hell is dark and made up of hundreds of subterranean tunnels going every which way. There are lanterns to light the way, and it is someone's job to just go around making sure every lantern is lit. I was riding in my hovercraft with June Samuels, a gray-haired woman with glasses that hung from her neck on a chain, and Grover Thoreau, a man who looked to be 160 if he was a day. He had crepey, wrinkled skin that hung off his frame. He was wearing an old black suit and a fedora. He reminded me of a crow, sitting there in the hovercraft and staring at me as if I were lunch. Was I going to be surrounded by senior citizens all the time? Were there no girls my age in hell?

I got off the hovercraft at Soul Destination, and Mr. Dodd greeted me and led me over to a table. On the table, there was packing tape and a magic marker. In front of the table were a stack of empty boxes and a series of bins. Each bin was marked 'green,' 'yellow,' or 'blue.'

"Okay, here's what you do," Mr. Dodd said. "You take a soul and put it in a box. Green is for Heaven, Yellow is for Purgatory, Blue is for Universal Return. You pick up a soul, put it in a compartment, and grab another soul of the same color until you fill a box. Eight souls to a box. Then you tape it up, write on the tape where it's heading to, and then stack them up, here." He showed me a storage room off to the left. "Delivery picks them up at the end of the day. Any questions?"

"Do you know when we get our first paychecks?"

He frowned and put his hands on his hips. "It usually takes a week." He gave me a long look and pursed his lips. "Any other questions?"

"No, I don't think so. It seems pretty straightforward," I said.

"Great. There are three of you working down here right now. This is Adrian." He nodded at a tall black man with a beard. "And this is Sierra," he said, pointing at a middle-aged woman with mousy brown wash-and-wear hair and a hint of a mustache. "This is Fynn's first day, so answer his questions and try to help him out, okay?" They both nodded, went over to their tables, and started working.

I peered into the bin. I don't know what I was expecting to see. It was basically a box of nothing. Cautiously, I stuck my hand in and scooped. A white, smoky thing came out of the box.

What does a soul look like? Sort of like a shadow, or a ghost, gray and gauzy. It feels kind of slippery, but it's as light as air. This soul was marked

'blue' so a blue light was pinned to it. If you didn't know better, you would think there was a blue light hovering in space. I thrust it into the box marked 'blue.' Each soul gets its own compartment, kind of like an egg carton. I got another soul and continued working.

By lunch, I felt I had gotten the hang of Soul Destination. For lunch, we could go to the cafeteria, which required hopping on a hovercraft, or we could go to the employee break room, where there were vending machines and a microwave. I elected to go to the break room.





## CHAPTER SEVEN

I WALKED DOWN one of the tunnels and found the break room, the second room on the right. There were vending machines on one wall and a few metal tables and chairs in the center. A vague smell of chicken filled the air. But I barely noticed any of these things, because at one of the tables was a girl so pretty my heart immediately jumped and my muscles froze. My mouth dropped open and I stared, transfixed.

She had glossy, light-brown hair that hung halfway down her back in waves. Her eyes were the color of the turquoise blue right in the center of a peacock feather. Her lips were the most luscious color pink. She looked up at me, a chip halfway to her mouth, and raised her eyebrows.

“Hello?” she said. “Dude, what’s the matter with you?”

I finally found the power to speak. “N-Nothing. Sorry.” I gestured at the chair across from her. “Okay if I sit here?”

She shrugged. “Do you see anyone else here?”

I sat down in the hard plastic chair and busied myself opening the bag of corn chips I had just gotten from the machine. “So. You work around here somewhere?” *Clever, Fynn*, I thought. *Why don’t you ask her what her sign is?*

“Yeah. Admissions. You?”

“Soul Destination.”

She wrinkled up her adorable little nose. “Is that boring?”

“Well, not so far. It’s my first day.”

I thought her eyes widened just a fraction, but I may have imagined it. Suddenly she leaned forward. “Really? What brings you to Hell?”

“Summer job. I’ve gotta save for...” I almost said a car, but then I changed it to ‘college’ because I thought it sounded smarter. “How about you? What brings you to Hell?”

She paused for a second, took a sip of her soda, and said, “Same as you, mostly. I needed a job.”

“So, Admissions. What do you do there?”

“We evaluate the people who come in, and then we figure out what level of Hell they go to. Every sin has a score, according to severity, so we count up their sins and tally up their scores. Then off they go—we never see them again.”

“I just sort the souls according to color,” I said, although she hadn’t asked. She smiled and got up, gathering her wrappers and water bottle.

“Wait! What’s your name?” I said as she started walking to the door.

“Lily.” She paused. “What’s yours?”

“Fynn. Fynn Hardin.”

She smiled and nodded. “Okay, Fynn Hardin. See you around.”

I watched her walk away, fascinated by the motion of her hips swaying side to side. When I couldn’t see her anymore, I said, “See you, Lily.”

I gathered all my trash and sped back to Soul Destination. We only got nine minutes for lunch, and I didn’t want to be late.

“Hey,” I said to Sierra and Adrian. “Wow, only nine minutes. That really flies by. Hey, either of you know a girl named Lily? She works in Admissions?” I was talking too fast, I could hear myself, but the words just kept flying out of my mouth as fast as they bubbled to the surface. They both looked at me and shook their heads.

*Bummer.*

I worked as quickly as I could for the rest of the day, thinking about Lily and wondering when I would see her again.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

ONCE I GOT the hang of it, Hell wasn't really that bad—at least, not at first. It was probably like any other summer job—yeah, it sort of sucked, but it was kind of fun, too. As soon as I got my first check, I ran to Free Rein and paid them a hundred dollars.

The woman behind the desk entered my payment into the computer and then looked at me over the tops of her glasses. “Don't run it up again,” she said sternly. Oh, really? Darn, I hadn't thought of that. Why do adults always think they have great advice to give to teenagers like we've never heard it before? We have the Internet, you know.

I got the hang of sorting souls, which wasn't really that difficult unless the indicator light had gone out. On a good day, I could package up to three hundred souls. In addition to Adrian and Sierra, depending on what day it was, I also worked with Tom and Audrey. Tom had a big nose, and his hair looked exactly like someone stood behind him with a blow dryer every morning and blew all his hair forward. Audrey was kind of a stickler for rules, which was annoying unless we—meaning me and whoever else I was working with—were making fun of her. Then it was a riot.

“You're supposed to fold the soul into thirds,” she said, crinkling her nose like she just smelled moldy cheese.

“Oh, I am so sorry. I didn't fold the soul into thirds! Whatever shall we do?” I said to Adrian.

“We will need to reassess our lives,” Adrian said gravely. We cracked up, and Audrey didn't speak to us for the rest of the day, which was fine with us.

Adrian was a pretty cool guy. This was his third summer working in Hell. “You don't want to work somewhere, I don't know, normal?” I asked him.

“Nah—Hell pays marginally better and besides, I have the hang of it now. It's kind of like a break from reality.”

Apparently, when he wasn't sorting souls in Hell he was an Accounting major at the University of Illinois. He already had a girlfriend—which was good, because there was no way I wanted to compete with some college dude for Lily—and a car, although he tried to make me feel better by telling me it was a piece of shit.

Sierra was fine, mostly quiet, and kept to herself. I guess maybe because she was older she felt she didn't have anything in common with us. She just kept her head down and sorted, although sometimes I swear I saw her trying to hide a smile.

This was Tom's first summer in Hell, and what he really, really wanted for next summer was to work somewhere else. As you might guess, it's freaking hot in Hell. They have fans and such, but it's still stiflingly hot all the time. It smells like ammonia and ash. They have a claustrophobic subterranean tunnel system that feels hot and closed and makes a lot of people freak out if they don't like tight spaces. And it's dark. There are lanterns every couple of feet, but it's kind of like working in a closet. There wasn't any cell phone reception—we were too deep underneath the earth. So, you couldn't text or call anyone your whole shift. I guess Tom was concerned because he had just started dating some girl—who he said was gorgeous—and he couldn't talk to her when he was at work.

"Just tell her your boss is really strict." Frankly, I was only mildly sympathetic. At least he *had* a girlfriend.

"Yeah, I guess." He still wasn't happy. I will say he tore out of there the second his shift was over, like a bat out of Hell.

Although I went to the break room instead of the cafeteria every day I worked, I didn't see Lily again. Not for weeks. I had almost given up when suddenly there she was, her lips wrapped around a straw in a soda, giving her a pout that made my head spin. It was a good thing there was a chair right next to her because my knees were like peanut butter.

"Hi!" I said, too loudly.

She looked at me appraisingly and said, "Hi, yourself."

"How's it going?" My words were coming out too fast. Crap, slow down. I sounded like Minnie Mouse.

"Going well. You?" Her eyelashes were stunning.

"Good. Things are fine in SD. How's Admissions?"

"Good."

What was with these one or two-word answers? Did she not like me? Why didn't she like me? Maybe it was my breath? I tried to breathe into my elbow to see if my breath was offensive but I didn't smell anything.

I cast about for something to say. "Do you go to school somewhere?"

She hesitated for a second and then said, "Yeah, I do. I go to high school... uh... in Springfield."

I could hardly dare to hope she meant Springfield, MA, but since Hell is big, she could be going to school anywhere on earth. "Where's that?"

“Nebraska.”

Major bummer. “Oh, right. Nebraska. I don’t know anyone who lives in Nebraska. Is it nice there?”

“Sure.”

I was totally striking out. I don’t really know what made me keep talking. “What do you like to do when you’re not in Hell?”

Again, a hesitation. “I like to . . . you know. Normal stuff. Shopping, hanging out. What do you like to do?”

“Mostly the same. Well, I’m not so much into shopping. I like video games. You like Halo 6?”

She shook her head and asked, “I’ve never played it. Is it fun?”

“Oh, yeah!” I enthusiastically described my exploits as Locke and my missions for the next fifteen minutes. Eventually, it occurred to me that I was droning on and on—maybe she wasn’t that interested. “So, anyway, do you play any video games?”

“I play—what’s that new one? The one with the weapons?”

“They all have weapons. What platform?”

“Xbox?” she said.

“Are there Aliens involved?”

She nodded.

“Maybe Prey?”

She nodded again.

“Wow.” Oh, my God. The woman of my dreams—she played video games!

Abruptly, she got up from the table. “I have to go back to work. See ya, Fynn.” She gave me a wave and—I could’ve sworn—a flirtatious look over her shoulder. I pondered that for a while, and then realized I was late getting back to SD.

“You’re late,” Audrey said.

“No shit,” I responded.

She made her prune face again, and then said, “The rule is people returning from break late will be forced to stay an extra thirty minutes.”

“What? I was only like, five minutes late.”

“It’s the rule,” she said stubbornly and started feverishly throwing souls into boxes.

“What the—never mind. Whatever.” Honestly, I didn’t much care. I was filled with a light, ballooning optimism about this girl I met. Maybe things were finally going my way.



## CHAPTER NINE

UP UNTIL NOW, I had been getting to work, reporting directly to Soul Destination—SD for those of us in the biz—working my hours, and then getting the hell out of there, pardon the pun. Today was pretty slow, and curiosity got the better of me, so I decided to explore a little. After all, Hell was a big, bustling place. There could be dateless girls all over Hell who needed me to come and rescue them from a life of loneliness and desperation.

Or maybe I was just bored.

I wandered out of SD and took a left down the hallway. Hell's subterranean tunnels were claustrophobic. They were dark, like medieval-castle dark, and lit by the same sort of lanterns glowing every so often. They smelled like copper and smoke. They were supported by carved-out stone, so I supposed they couldn't collapse. I could picture myself buried under a pile of rubble and stuck in Hell somewhere for the rest of my life.

I wandered down the dimly lit tunnels, which seemed to wind around and around. This meant you couldn't see very far ahead of you. I was almost knocked over by a couple of afreets. These demons are responsible for delivering all the supplies to and from everywhere in Hell. They are short—very short, only reaching up to my kneecaps. They have potbellies and usually have beards, even the lady afreets. They have solid, thick feet. This combined with their short stature makes them very hard to knock over, but as effective as bowling balls at whacking people out of their way. Two of them came barreling past me, pushing a cart loaded with supplies. I leapt out of the way just in time.

"Watch it!" One snapped, and before I could reply they were gone.

*Bastards.* I continued on and came to a fork where the tunnel split in two. For no reason, I chose left. Eventually, I came to a door marked Level One. I peered in the window and almost immediately wished I hadn't.

I saw sad, soulless people staring at me with hollow eyes. The room—about the size of a football field—was filled with snow and ice. The wind was blowing snow around them, into their faces, into their hair, and onto their skin. Their skin was exposed—they had thin rags to cover themselves, but they were shivering so violently that if they weren't already dead I was sure they would've frozen to death. Fingers and ears and bare feet were black and blistered. They

stumbled around, mumbling to themselves, bumping into each other. If any one of them tried to sit down, a goblin was there to poke them with a stick and make them continue their exhausted wandering.

“Jesus,” I whispered to myself.

“We don’t use that name here.”

I spun around and found myself looking at a slim man of middle-eastern descent. He was taller than I am—5’10” in case you were wondering—and was wearing a simple sort of toga. He would’ve looked completely normal except for his long twisted fingernails and the two small horns sprouting from the middle of his forehead.

“Whoops, sorry.” I jerked my head at the collection of miserable souls in the room. “What did they do?”

“Various things. Some were unrepentant liars and philanderers. Some of them were constant complainers. So, we give them something to complain about. Who might you be?”

“Fynn. Fynn Hardin, Soul Destination.”

“Ah. Nice to meet you. I am Belphegor. I oversee levels one and two, or the junior achievers, as we like to call them.” He smiled a little, pleased with his little joke. He waited a second, expecting a laugh, and when no laugh was forthcoming, he said, “I have a pick-up for you. Shall I give it to you now, or send it via afreet?”

“Uhm...send it via afreet, I guess. I have a few stops to make.”

Belphegor bowed and said, “Excellent.” Then he pushed the door open and disappeared into the snow-filled room. I heard more intense moaning when he entered, but I didn’t want to know so I hurried on.

I could’ve sworn I was going in circles. Losing my bearings, I couldn’t have made it back to SD if I tried. Maybe my own personal Hell would be getting lost in Hell for the rest of my life. I also worried about getting in trouble at SD, although if I remained lost, surely someone up there would wonder where I went. And send out a search party. Maybe.

I got the sense I was descending. The hallways seemed gloomier, closer. The ceiling was lower, and the dirt that made up the floors was damp. And what was that utterly nauseating smell? It was the kind of smell that crawled down your throat and stuck there like a blade.

Eventually, it occurred to me that if I was going down, what I wanted to do was reverse direction and try to go up. So, I turned around and went the way I had come, but after only a minute or two I came to another fork. Which way did I come from? I couldn’t remember. The right-hand fork seemed to



be headed in an upward direction, so I took it. I walked on, slowing down, trying to make heads or tails of Hell's intricate hallways.

Eventually I came to another door. I peered in. It was a large, empty white space. I looked closer. Nothing. It was a room filled with nothing. Pondering this, I wondered where all the bodies had gone. I thought about going in to look, but I was afraid I might never get out. Later I learned this was where the narcissists went. No one can see them, hear them, or smell them. When I heard that I made a mental note to volunteer to feed the homeless or work with underprivileged kids or something. You know, just in case.

I pressed on, trying to head upwards, but I felt almost as if I was upside down. Was I going up or down? I couldn't tell. The walls closed in. I felt dizzy and a little nauseous. Where was I? I walked on and on. I came to another door. This one had just a hole in the door—the glass would've melted.

It was a deep cavern. I couldn't see the bottom, but hot lava flowed by the floor. There were rock formations. I couldn't see anyone here either.

Suddenly a face appeared in the hole, so close to mine that I gasped. I was nose-to-nose with a face contorted in agonizing pain. The mouth was open wide, and the lips were pulled back in a rictus scream exposing rotting teeth and oozing gums. The stench of fetid breath hit me and I gagged. A hand reached out and clawed at the hole, scratching desperately at the wood.

Just as suddenly as it appeared, it was gone. I stood shaking, the screams echoing, and I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the image of pure torture. My skin was clammy and my legs suddenly felt like Jell-O. I had to get out of here. This wasn't a fun little field trip anymore. It was seriously creeping me out. I mean, I know I *worked* in Hell, but I had never given all that much thought to what might be going on down in those lower levels. If you buy a T-shirt for five bucks, do you seriously think about all the children in third world countries who worked for a dollar an hour to make it? No, you think, *T-shirt! Five bucks! Score!*

I wound around and around, seriously lost. Why wasn't there an elevator or something? Where were the hover crafts? Didn't they run everywhere in Hell? This must be how people felt about taxis in New York—why were they never around when you needed one? My head hurt. I needed to sit down.

I came to a door. Carved deeply into the charred wood was the name "Governor Gaap." I was thinking over whether I should or shouldn't knock when the door swung open, and before me stood a man who resembled a boulder with giant bat wings growing out of his shoulders. They flapped once and then were still.

“Can I help you?” he said.

“I...I’m lost. I can’t find my way back to Soul Destination.” I managed.

“Soul Destination. That’s on Level One. You’re on sub-level Five, a long way from there. Let me summon you a hovercraft.” He clapped his hairy, clawed hands, and immediately a hovercraft appeared, humming and ready to go.

“Wow, thanks Mister, uh...”

“I am Governor Gaap. I’m in charge of southern Hell.”

“Southern Hell...so, there’s a Northern Hell?”

“There’s an upstairs.” He smiled. His lips were black. “That’s where you work. I suggest you get back there as soon as possible. Nice meeting you, young man.” He turned and walked into his office.

I was going to tell him my name, but then it occurred to me that maybe I really didn’t want him to know. I sat in the hovercraft, and right away it took off like it was on a mission. It whipped along the hallways of Hell, which, did I mention had a vast multitude of turns? Before I knew it I was extremely motion sick and hanging onto the roll bar for dear life. My stomach lurched wildly. I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed for the ride to be over.

Finally, I was dropped off, miraculously right outside SD. I lurched out of the hovercraft, which immediately took off. Adrian and Sierra both stopped sorting and looked up as I pushed open the door.

“Where have you been?” Adrian said.

“I was just wandering around and got lost.” I wiped the sweat off my forehead. I had never been so happy to see SD. Furthermore, today was Audrey’s day off, so no one was around to harass me for falling behind on my quota.

“Word of advice: Don’t go poking around Hell,” Adrian said.

“Good advice,” I said.

## CHAPTER TEN

**WORKING EVERY MONDAY, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday** was okay, but I never really got a weekend, or even more than one day off in a row. I thought about complaining, but I was worried about what happened to people who complained about the working conditions. There was no precedent. Furthermore, since I didn't have a girlfriend, I didn't have anything to do anyway.

Tuesday started like any other day in Hell. I was working with Tom and Sierra, so it was nice and quiet. Around mid-morning, Dodd came down from his office and stood in the middle of the room until we all stopped working and stared at him expectantly.

"I need someone to run this over to Marketing, ASAP." He was holding an envelope in one hand and hitting the corner of it into his palm.

Marketing? Hell had a marketing department? What would that entail? All I could picture was a TV commercial and some disembodied voice saying, "Are you tired of making good choices in your life? Had it with noble intentions? Determined to be miserable? Come to sunny Hell! You'll enjoy our warm and flaming atmosphere, our friendly non-human staff, and the total conviction that nothing will ever be good again!"

Tom, Sierra, and I all looked at each other. After the last disaster of getting lost in Hell, I was reluctant to venture past SD. I don't know what was up with Tom and Sierra, but they didn't look excited either.

Exasperated, Dodd said, "You just have to cross the central hub, and Marketing is on your right, next to Admissions. It's not far. It'll take you ten minutes."

*Admissions? Did he say Admissions?* "I'll do it!" I said.

"Thank you, Fynn," Dodd said as he handed me the envelope. I nodded and tried not to seem too eager. Taking a left out of SD, I followed the hallway down into the central hub. Dorothy smiled and waved.

"Hi, Dorothy!" She had pink hair and orange skin today. She kind of reminded me of Dunkin' Donuts. I liked Dorothy, but I didn't want to stop to chat—I was on a mission, so I waved but didn't break stride.

I went down the west hallway where most of the corporate offices were. There were signs on the doors, and I finally found the marketing department.

It looked like a more or less normal office. I walked in, and the office manager turned to me and blinked slowly. A frill covered the top of his dry green head. He didn't say anything, but I was pretty sure his forked tongue flickered. Cautiously, I handed him the envelope. He hissed and nodded at me. I turned around quickly and left.

Now to say hello to Lily. I found Admissions just fine, but before I got to the door I was stopped cold. A fearsome-looking chimera with the head of a lion, a goat's head on its back, and a snake for a tail was strutting down the hallway. His snake tail was nipping at the backs of a few forlorn-looking people. They had their heads down as they studied the floor. I stared. One of them looked kind of familiar.

"Uncle Seymour?" I said.

The man in the middle jerked his head up and stared at me. He resembled a praying mantis. He had a broad forehead that tapered down to a pointed chin and large eyes that asked, "What's in it for me?"

"Fynn?" He asked in amazement.

Uncle Seymour was the kind of relative you only saw at weddings and funerals and hardly at any other time. He wasn't even my uncle; he was my mother's uncle, so my great uncle. Still, I thought he was a great guy. Unlike a lot of relatives, he would take time to talk to me, squatting down so we were at eye level and really listening when I told him about my fascination with insects. Okay, I was a dorky kid. But Uncle Seymour made me feel like it was perfectly normal to be obsessed with the mating rituals of a male water strider. I went to his funeral a few months ago.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

He glanced at the chimera. "What are *you* doing here?"

"I work here. What...are you..." I said awkwardly. Obviously, Hell didn't get many visitors. Uncle Seymour had gone to Hell! I wondered what he did to get him here.

"Oh, Fynn. I'm so sorry." He shook his head with a knowing smile. His rheumy eyes bore into me, and he grabbed my wrist and leaned closer. "What are you in for?"

I shook his hand off and jumped. "I *work* here, Uncle Seymour."

"Sure you do, son."

"I do!" I snapped. I felt my stomach muscles clench and my face grow hot, although that may have been because I was standing too close to a lantern.

At this point, the snake-head tail of the chimera bit Uncle Seymour, and he yelped and started walking. He turned around and stared at me until he and the group of inductees disappeared around the corner.

Damn, talking to Uncle Seymour had chewed up all ten minutes Dodd thought it should take someone to drop something off in marketing. Much to my chagrin, I would have to find Lily later, although I did try to see into the office as I passed it but didn't see her.

I pondered what unfortunate life choices Uncle Seymour must have made that landed him in Hell. I don't know why, but I never thought I would run into anyone I knew in Hell. It was unsettling, to say the least. For the rest of the day, I kept my head down and just concentrated on hitting my quota.

§ § §

Wednesday afternoon, I was sprawled out on the living room couch, eating nachos and watching a reality show called *Celebrity Truck Drivers*. It wasn't very good, and I was just about to doze off when I heard the door slam. I opened my eyes to find Kevin standing in the living room, clenching and unclenching his fists. His bottom lip stuck out a little and he was breathing hard.

"Hey, Kevin, what's up?" I sat up.

"Nothing!" he snapped.

I studied him as he stomped up to his room. Was I this moody when I was twelve? In my head, I was a ray of sunshine and light, but I supposed it was possible that I was moody. I would have to ask Mom.

I dozed back off on the couch until I heard the front door and the telltale pitter-patter of toddler's feet gamboling down the hallway.

"Inn! Inn!" Maddie shrieked. She climbed up on the couch to say hi, patting my face with her chubby hands. Mom walked in after a minute. She smiled at me and sat down in the recliner.

"How was work?" Mom asked.

"Fine." Maddie climbed off of me and went to explore her toy bin. I pulled myself up into a sitting position. "Hey, I was wondering about Uncle Seymour."

Mom leaned forward, propping her chin in her hand. "What about him?"

"Well, what sort of a person was he?"

Mom looked at me in the exact same way you might look at someone if they just told you they were contagious. "Why do you ask?"

I shrugged and tried to appear nonchalant. "Just wondering. He was in a dream I had."

"Well, he was smart. He was funny and sarcastic. Actually, he kind of reminded me of you."

*That's what I was afraid of.* Was I destined to go to Hell after I died? Because I really didn't want to. Not only would I know everyone on the staff—*Hey, Frank.*

*How's the torture going*—which would be awkward, but Hell was no fun to spend any part of your afterlife.

“Good old Uncle Seymour,” she said. Then she frowned as if she just remembered something.

“What?”

She glanced at me and shrugged. “Oh, nothing. It was a long time ago. Anyway, can you keep an eye on your sister while I throw together something for dinner?”

“Yeah, sure. C'mon, Maddie. Let's play with something noisy.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

IT'S SO HOT." I moaned and rolled over onto my back, thus almost flipping off the chaise lounge. I was at Josh's house, hanging out with him and his girlfriend, Courtney. Courtney had long, tanned legs that extended out from her cut-off jean shorts and ended in pretty feet, painted with hot pink nail polish. A plaid bikini top gracefully curved around her breasts, not that I was looking or anything.

"Is it hotter than Hell?" Josh asked. Out of all the people I told, Josh and Court were the only people who really believed I had a job in Hell. It was only June, and it was so hot outside even the mosquitoes seemed lazy and unmotivated.

"Hell is hot, but it's a dry heat."

"Right. It's not the heat, it's the humidity," Josh said. I threw my empty water bottle at him. Court laughed.

"You must be used to it by now," Court said.

"Not really." I sat up and wiped my face, which had sweat running down it in little rivulets. We were out by his pool—technically, his parents' pool. The sun shimmered off the water and reflected onto the concrete. It was ninety-two degrees out. Josh's parents' house had a typical suburban backyard. The pool was plopped in the sunny part, meaning on hot days it was twice as hot. I jumped in the deep end, making a huge splash. Courtney squealed. Josh then jumped in, and Court followed, still wearing her shorts. It was so cool, wet, and refreshing. New life surged through us as we splashed and goofed around, enjoying the respite from the suffocating heat.

When we finally dragged ourselves out of the pool we dried only our faces with our towels. I flipped my towel on the chaise lounge and stretched out, feeling much better. The heat was tolerable, almost friendly now.

"So, Fynn. Have you met anyone, down in Hell?" Courtney giggled as if this was absurd.

"Well, maybe."

"Really?" She sat up, interested, lowered her sunglasses a smidgen, and peered over the top of them. "Who is she?"

"She's not a demon, is she?" Josh asked.

“No! She’s nice. I mean, I... I like her but... I don’t know much about her. We just met.” I didn’t mention dreaming of her at night, Lily’s long hair wrapped around my hands, feeling her body pressed against me, her mouth hungrily tasting mine.

“Where is she from?” Maddie asked.

“Nebraska.”

“Nebraska? I didn’t think anyone lived in Nebraska,” Josh said.

“That’s what I said!”

“Nebraska. So it would be a long-distance relationship I guess, then, huh? That’s rough,” Courtney said. I hadn’t really thought about it.

“Well, we’re not at the dating stage yet. But... I don’t know. She could just get off the elevator at my stop, if she came to visit, couldn’t she?”

“I guess. Or you could go to Nebraska. Hang out in cornfields and shit,” Josh said.

“Yeah. Nebraska.” I paused. “Is there anything in Nebraska?”

“They have Omaha. They probably have, like, McDonald’s and stuff. Other than that, no. There’s nothing there,” Josh said. I knew Josh had never been to Nebraska, but he was smart so I figured maybe he looked it up once, or something. “Why don’t you ask her? That would be an interesting topic of conversation. ‘Hey’—what’s her name?”

“Lily.”

“Hey, Lily, what on earth do you do all day?”

“I assume she goes to school. Or, wait—how old is she?” Court asked.

“I don’t know. Around our age, I think. She plays video games.”

“Oooo—a shared interest!” Josh said.

“Yeah. I mean, if anything ever comes of it.”

“Don’t worry Fynn. You’ll find a girlfriend one of these days.” Josh smirked.

“Not without a car,” I said glumly.

“Well, you’re working on that. How much money have you saved?”

“Not enough.”

“Well, keep working. Do they have overtime?” Josh asked.

“I don’t think so.” Actually, I hadn’t looked into it. Maybe they did. I’d have to ask Dodd about it. I could use more money to put away. While I had paid off my debt to Free Rein, so far I had only saved \$1000, which is obviously not enough for a car.

Courtney smiled at me sympathetically. She had really white teeth. “Hang in there, Fynn. Things will get better. You’ll see.”

I didn’t know it at the time, but things were about to get worse. Much worse.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

JUNE CREPT INTO July, and I still wasn't making any progress with Lily. So, when Josh said he was having a Fourth of July party and that I should come, I said sure. Why not?

Josh's parents were on vacation in Mexico—Cancun, Josh said. It didn't matter; the point was they weren't home, which meant a fun night of debauchery and mayhem. At least in theory.

Josh lives in a nicer neighborhood than mine. In my neighborhood, all the houses have fences that surround the small-ish yards, and there are at least two cars in every driveway. All the neighbors wave as they pass you going down the street. In Josh's neighborhood, the cars are tucked away in the garages, and the yards are huge and only fenced in if there's a dog. No one waves.

I didn't have a car, but I knew a kid near me who did. His name was Liam. He agreed to give me a lift if I walked over to his house. He had red hair and freckles and the annoying habit of saying, "Am I right?" after almost everything he said. But he had a car, so I went. After a thankfully short ride—"Nice house, am I right?"—we parked on the street a few houses down from Josh's.

I heard music in Josh's backyard, so I went around back towards the pool. There were about thirty to forty kids, some I knew from high school and some I didn't. I looked around for Josh. He was over by the gas grill, flipping burgers with one hand and drinking a beer with the other. "Hey, Fynn!" He called out. "C'mon over! What can I get ya? Beer, burger, hot dog?"

"I'll have a beer." I didn't really like the taste of beer all that much, but it was alcohol, and damned if I was going to look like a lame duck. Josh opened a bottle and handed it to me. He looked busy so I wandered around, saying hi to some kids from school.

"Hey, Fynn. How's it going?" my friend Tony asked.

"Good. You?"

"Can't complain," he said as he threw his arm around a very pretty brunette. I think her name might've been Julie, but then again it could've been Robin. He nuzzled her behind the ear and she laughed. "Haven't seen you around much."

"I've been working a lot." I took a huge chug of beer.

"Where ya working?"

“Hell.”

He laughed. “That bad, huh? Well, cheer up. It’s already July.”

I nodded but walked away, not terribly interested in watching Tony and Julie/Robin/whatever-her-name-was slobber all over each other.

A couple of kids were playing chicken in the pool. It looked fun, but then I’d be stuck sitting around in wet clothes for the rest of the party. I wandered over to one of the snack tables and helped myself to a handful of chips and some cocktail wieners, wondering what to do with myself. I always felt awkward at parties. Do you just go up to people and start talking? Stand around looking like a wallflower, hoping to God someone starts talking to you? I promised myself that if I wasn’t having fun in, like, 45 minutes, I was leaving. I’d be having a lot more fun playing Mall Zombie by myself at this point.

Just when I was about to throw in the towel, find Josh, and tell him I was going, a cute girl I had never seen before approached the snack table. She had wide brown eyes, blonde hair, and dark eyebrows. I love that look.

“Hi,” she said shyly as she stuck her hand in the chip bowl.

“Hi.” I wondered where she was from. I searched for something clever to say and went with, “So, how do you know Josh?”

She shrugged and smiled. “I don’t, really. My cousin goes to school with him, but I’m from Canton.” Canton was a town over. Good sign.

“Oh. Who’s your cousin?”

“Hailey Lyons?”

“Oh, right, Hailey. I think she was in my Algebra class.” Maybe.

“So, what’s your name?” she asked me.

I told her my name was Fynn and she said her name was Cassidy. Cassidy Evans. We talked for a bit as we ate snacks. Then, in a fit of social competence, I said, “Why don’t we sit and I’ll get us some beers?” Two chairs next to each other had just been vacated. She nodded, and I went to go fetch the beer. I was relieved when she was still waiting right where I left her.

We talked. Her parents were divorced, and she lived with her mom and two sisters. Her mom was a doctor, and she thought maybe that’s part of the reason her parents divorced—not only was her mom more accomplished than her dad, she was also working all time. Her dad was a high school teacher a few towns away.

“So, you live with your mom but you never see her?” I asked.

“Not much. She’s an ER doctor. She works a lot.”

I filled her in on my family, my mom being a nurse working nights, so I sort of knew where she was coming from, and my dad being in business. I told her about Kevin and that Maddie was a surprise baby.

“How old is Maddie?” she asked.

“Uh...a little over a year. Fifteen months?” I guessed.

“My son Blake is eighteen months,” she said, looking at her shorts.

I wasn’t sure I heard her correctly. Did she just say she had a son? I stared while I waited for inspiration to hit me.

Cassidy looked up and said, “It’s okay. It’s just something I like to get out of the way.”

“Oh. No, it’s fine. Wow. A son, huh? That must be hard. How do you, like, go to high school?”

“My high school actually has a day care program, which is great.”

“Yeah. So...” Now what? Do I ask her if she’s single? Because in light of her having a son, I wasn’t sure what the protocol was. Was I supposed to assume Blake’s father was involved and that she was just out for a pleasant evening to make new friends? For that matter, what was *my* intention? I mean, just taking care of Maddie was difficult, and she wasn’t even my kid. I couldn’t imagine trying to date someone with a son. Did that make me a future step-dad? I didn’t think I could handle it.

Lucky for me, Cassidy seemed to read my mind and said, “I haven’t talked to Blake’s dad since Blake was a month old.” She took a long sip of her beer.

Well, I guess she was single. The rest of my questions just tumbled around in my buzzed brain, the words rearranging themselves in different ways. I think Cassidy noticed my mental wrestling match because she said, “I know—it’s a lot to digest.”

I nodded and decided to keep talking to her for a while. We talked a lot, actually. I liked her, but I couldn’t help but compare her to Lily. Lily was more beautiful, but then again, I wasn’t really getting anywhere with Lily. I hadn’t even seen her in a few weeks. Plus she lived in Nebraska, whereas Cassidy lived about ten minutes away. Cassidy was easy to talk to as well—easy for me, who stumbled and stuttered and looked like an idiot in front of girls most of the time. But she had a kid. I couldn’t imagine I was mature enough to date someone with a kid. Half of the time *I* needed supervision.

The party flew by. When it got dark Cassidy and I watched the fireworks that you could just barely see over the trees. Some kids lit illegal fireworks in the backyard until one of them lit the grass on fire and Josh got pissed.

“Well, I gotta go. See ya, Fynn.” She started to walk away.

Should I call her? Should I ask for her number? Shit, what do I do?

Really, I was still infatuated with Lily. But what if it didn’t work out? How could it even work out? But...I was still pondering Cassidy being a mom. That seemed like an awful lot to take on.

*My Summer Job in Hell*

I stood there and, while I was still thinking about it, Cassidy disappeared around a corner.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I WOKE UP the next morning, hot and sweaty and tangled in my sheets. My mouth felt like I had been eating cotton balls, and there was a repetitive throbbing going on in my head. I rolled over and stared at my Kate Upton poster. Somehow the banging in my head grew louder. I covered my traitorous head with a pillow and told it to shut up.

“Fynn!”

*Oh, God.*

“Fynn!”

“What?”

“Will you watch Maddie for about an hour? I have to run some errands, and I don’t want to take her.”

I slowly dragged myself into a sitting position and blinked. It felt like someone had poured sand into my eyes while I was asleep. “Yeah, give me a minute.”

What day was this? Where was my phone? I grabbed it off my side table and saw it was nine o’clock on Sunday, July 5th. Rubbing the back of my sweaty neck, I pulled on some shorts and went downstairs.

Maddie was staggering around, weaving between her toys and other obstacles like a sailor with an inner ear infection. Mom was stuffing her cell phone into her purse. She looked irritable.

“I don’t know where Kevin went, and your father had to work. I need to go to the grocery store and...some other places. I’ll be back.” She nodded at me and closed the door firmly. I suspected what she really wanted was to get away from Maddie. Making my way into the kitchen, I hit the button on the coffee maker. Before I could even sit down Maddie was grinning and making a beeline for the door to the cellar.

“Hey, no!” I said, steering her away from the door. All I needed was for Maddie to plummet down the basement steps. She wasn’t that good at stairs yet, and it’s dark down there. I explained this to her, but she insisted on running for the door about seventeen more times, shrieking with laughter every time I caught her and swept her back into the living room. I was already sweating.

“All right, that’s enough.” I herded her into the living room and put the baby gates on both sides so she couldn’t get out. She howled.

“Hey, look. Look, Maddie! Isn’t this great?” I held up one of her loud flashing light toys. She looked mildly interested. I sighed, finished my cold coffee, and pondered what life must be like for Cassidy. I hoped she had someone to help her when Blake engaged in toddler terrorist behavior.

The front door slammed and Kevin walked in. He had a face on him like he just lost his dog.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Nothing.”

“Kevin, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

He sure was acting strange. I watched as he went up to his room, and I made a mental note to ask Mom about him later.

After a few hours, Mom was back. I think her hair was different. Maddie squealed, ran over to her, and Mom picked her up. I’m pretty sure Maddie’s babbling was her telling Mom about being kept captive in the living room.

“Hey, Mom—do you know what’s up with Kevin?” I asked.

Mom put Maddie back down. “Why?”

“I don’t know. He seems off. Like, depressed or something.”

Mom looked puzzled. “I haven’t noticed, but I’ll ask him about it.”

“Good.” Leaving my worries about Kevin in Mom’s capable hands, I went upstairs and shut the door to my room. Peace and quiet, at least for now.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

**Y**OU MAY HAVE noticed, as certainly Josh pointed out about three hundred times, that even though I had been crushing hard on Lily for weeks, I had not actually asked her out. I was working my way up to it, I swear. But every time I went to say, “So, do you want to maybe catch a movie or something?” I stared into her gorgeous blue eyes, my mouth went dry, and instead I said something completely inane, such as, “Want a Cheetos?”

I really had to up my game.

“Just ask her out already,” Josh said. “What, does she have a boyfriend?”

Actually, she didn’t. This I knew, but only because we were talking about stuff we liked to do when we weren’t working, and she said she liked to shop and play the video game *Zombie Death Mall* online. I managed to say, “Oh, does your boyfriend play that, too?” She said she didn’t have one. This was weeks ago. I knew she was probably at least somewhat aware that I liked her, so I don’t know why I couldn’t close the deal. Because I’m a chicken shit, that’s why.

“Cassidy really liked you,” Josh said.

I sort of knew that, I guess.

“I gave her your number.”

“Wait, what?” I said.

Josh sighed. “Look, you’re not getting anywhere with this Lily chick, and you and Cassidy seemed to like each other, so when she asked me for it, I gave it to her. Sorry if I shouldn’t have.”

“It’s okay.” I *did* like Cassidy. But I still felt I should give me and Lily another shot. Or a shot, at least.

As July hammered on, I knew I had to do something. After all, soon it would be August. I would quit working in Hell and go back to school, and she probably would, too. So I had to act fast. Pretty fast, anyway.

I spent the morning in Soul Destination, working with Audrey and Tom. Tom worked quickly, almost carelessly, and he didn’t make many mistakes; the reason I knew this is because at the end of every shift they reported our accuracy rate on an electronic board. Tom was always above ninety-four percent. Apparently if you slid below eighty-five percent they fired you. So far I had managed to hover above ninety-two percent, which wasn’t surprising because

separating souls was pretty straightforward. I was happy with ninety-two percent. Audrey, on the other hand, had a fit if she scored anything below a hundred percent. Naturally, we were very mature and supportive about this and harassed her mercilessly.

“Oh, my God! You should just quit, now. You’re a failure. How do you live with yourself?”

“I don’t know if I can continue on, in the face of such incompetence.”

Then her nostrils would flare, her ears would get all red, and she’d say something like, “I am doing my best! I really don’t understand why I didn’t get a hundred percent.” Then she would mumble to herself while we giggled and sometimes just outright laughed. Okay, we were jerks, but she really had to lighten up.

Lunch rolled around. I had the best luck finding Lily in the break room, so that’s where I headed. Tom went to the cafeteria and Audrey—I really don’t know where Audrey spent her lunch breaks, but anywhere not near me was fine. I walked into the break room and there she was. Lily. My heart jumped like it had paddles on it and my breath seized. God, she was luscious.

“Hi,” I said as I made my way to the vending machines.

“Hi,” she said.

I grabbed a ham and cheese sandwich and Coke and sat down next to her, focusing on unwrapping my sandwich. I couldn’t very well start with, *Hey, you want to hang out sometime*, so I went to the standard lunchtime conversation starter. “What did you get?”

“Tuna.”

“From the machine? It’s not like, poison or something?”

She lifted the edge of the bread and sniffed delicately. “Doesn’t seem to be.”

“Oh, well, that’s good.” I took a bite of my sandwich. “Aren’t there any condiments around here?”

She lifted her chin towards a table next to the vending machine. “I think so.”

“Oh.” I felt mildly stupid, but at least now I had mayonnaise. “So. How have you been?” I ventured.

She finished chewing and swallowed. “Good. And you?”

“Oh, I’ve been fine. Uhh...play any good games lately?”

She smiled, and I swear I heard angels. “Actually, I just found a new one I love! It’s called Destruction.”

“Ooo—that sounds fun.”

She described the game to me, her face animated and lively, and I have no idea what she said. I was entranced by her mouth, her nose, and her face. I was in deep. Break time flew by as we laughed and discussed great video



games of our time, and I guess I made appropriate responses. I glanced at the clock. My break was up in three minutes. I took a deep breath. “We should hang out sometime.”

There was a pause. She stared at me for a second, and I thought, *that’s it. It’s over. I’ve blown it.* But to my surprise, she smiled shyly and said, “Yeah, okay. I can come to Massachusetts.”

I laughed, but then I thought, *this is a challenge, her living in Nebraska and me in Massachusetts.* “Sure! You could come to my house and hang out for a while, and then I could bring you back to the elevator. You could take it to Hell and then to your home.” That didn’t really explain what would happen when school started and I quit Hell, but we could get to that later.

She gave me a long, appraising look. “Okay. When?”

“How about today?” No time like the present.

“Sure. Where shall I meet you?”

“How about...how about right here? At 6:00 p.m.? What time do you have to be home?”

“My curfew is 10:00 p.m.”

Four hours with Lily! I had died and gone to heaven.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I SPENT THE rest of the day counting down the hours and fantasizing about my date with Lily. Obviously, this made me incredibly distracted, and my accuracy rate slid to eighty-seven percent.

“You really need to focus,” Audrey said, pursing her lips and looking judgmental.

“Yup, you’re right,” I said cheerfully. Even Miss Judgmental Supreme herself couldn’t spoil my fantastic mood. I was going to hang out with Lily! I was going to hang out with Lily! This sing-songed through my head, and I would smile to myself, which I think made my coworkers think I had some kind of mental disorder. But I didn’t really care. The culmination of all my summer fantasies was coming to fruition! Lily. Lily. Lily.

Finally, 6:00 p.m. arrived. I bolted to the time clock, punched out, and then hightailed it to the break room.

Empty.

I looked up and down the hallway. Waiting a minute or two, I looked up and down the hallway again. I sat at a table, taking out my cell phone before I remembered Hell didn’t get any cell phone reception. Still, I could play Candy Crush. I played for about 45 seconds, and I got up to check the hallway again.

I knew it was too good to be true. She stood me up. I didn’t know where I had gone wrong, but obviously somewhere. Maybe it was too soon? Maybe too late? Maybe she was put off by the thought of having a relationship with someone seven states away from hers—I had Googled it. Or maybe it was my approach. I tried to remember how much I had talked about myself. Did I let her talk enough? Did...

“Hello.”

I jerked my head up and there she was. Lily.

I jumped out of my seat. “Hi!”

She laughed. “Afraid I was going to blow you off?”

“No, no, of course not. Are you ready to go?”

“Sure.”

We walked out of the break room and caught a hovercraft to central corporate. Waving at Dorothy, I noticed she was sporting purple hair and green skin today.

“You look nice,” I said as I boarded the elevator. I couldn’t help but notice that Lily’s hand was firmly gripping my elbow, and I liked it. It made me feel like I was hers.

Dorothy smiled and said, “Thanks, Fynn. Have a nice evening.”

“I will!” I said as the doors closed. I glanced at Lily and a thought occurred to me. “Hey Lily, what’s your last name?”

She hesitated, just a fraction of a second. She glanced over my shoulder and said, “Case.”

I always got motion sick on the elevator, so I was momentarily quiet while I focused on not throwing up on her shoes, because I was pretty sure that would ruin the whole date. Luckily, I held it together, and finally the elevator stopped.

“Okay, Lily Case, welcome to Massachusetts!” We got off the elevator in the basement of Franklin Regional High School. She looked around, taking it in. Since it was a little after 6:20 p.m. in July, it wasn’t dark yet, but obviously there weren’t any lights on. It gave the whole place a deserted feel, like somewhere you’d film “My High School Horror Story” or something like that. But she seemed interested, asking questions like what subjects I had taken and what I would be taking in the fall. I brushed over my lackadaisical grades and mentioned that I enjoyed study hall. But she didn’t laugh.

“Are you hungry?” I asked her.

“Uhm, sure.”

“Great! I have just the place in mind.”

As I might have mentioned, I have no car. There isn’t a lot of public transportation in Franklin, so I called an Uber and we went to my favorite pizza place, “Al’s Pizza.” It was small and cozy and smelled delicious. We grabbed a table, and I ordered us a medium pizza and two cokes.

I sat across from her and stared at her beautiful blue eyes and button nose and said, “Okay, Lily Case. Tell me everything.”

She laughed.

“No, seriously, I want to know everything about you. What do you do every day? What’s it like in Nebraska?”

She started to talk, hesitating a little at first and then gathering some steam. She said she was a pretty good student, about a B average, but if she wanted to go to college she felt she would have to leave Nebraska. However, her Dad had a heart condition, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to go far from home. I almost said, “There’s a ton of great colleges in Massachusetts,” but I managed not to. It might be a little over the top for the first date. Maybe I would save it for the next one. She said she had a little sister named Kathy who was grade-A annoying. She lived in a small town about an hour away from Omaha.

The pizza arrived—her favorite toppings were pineapple and bacon, so that’s what I ordered—and we talked on and on. I drank three cokes, and between us we finished the whole pizza. Before I knew it, it was 9:30 p.m. and time to take her back to the high school so she could go to Hell.

“I guess it’s time to go.” I couldn’t stop myself from smiling at her. I was having so much fun.

She stretched her arms over her head. Wow, she had long arms. They kind of bent towards her head, like they were put on backwards. They looked like antlers. “Okay.”

We got back to FRHS and I tipped the driver, who grunted at me as he drove away. I walked her back to the elevator, trying to walk slowly. For one thing, I was trying to stretch out the time as long as it could go. And, hanging over my head was the age-old question, do I kiss her or not?

I really, really wanted to. But other than hanging onto my elbow as we boarded the elevator to get here in the first place, she hadn’t touched me or made any affectionate overtures. Maybe she wasn’t really into me?

I felt the warmth from her body as she walked next to me. I looked at her from the side. She smelled delicious, like flowers in the spring. She had a beautiful profile. Her nose was a perfect little ski slope, and her cheekbones were so sharp you could ski off them. Her lips were a great shade of pink, soft and full, and so kissable it hurt.

“I had a good time,” she said.

Good? She had a good time? Not a great time? “So did I,” I said. If she was going to play it casual so was I.

She stood in front of the open elevator doors, about to step into them and head back to Hell and then to her home. It was now or never.

I took a step towards her. She didn’t step back, so that was good. I leaned in and closed my eyes. Go, go, go—touch down. I felt my lips press onto hers. They were soft and warm. No slobber. Great kisser.

She put her hands on my shoulders and said sweetly, “I have to get back. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah. Tomorrow,” I breathed. I trotted away, and my feet never touched the ground. Never had I so looked forward to going to Hell.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I HAD TROUBLE sleeping that night, partly because I was so excited I felt like I had wings. I'm sure the fact that I had three cokes had something to do with it, too, but really it was because of Lily. I went over every part of the date in my mind, over and over again. Especially the kiss. It was wonderful. My lips met hers, and my nerves sang out in a joyous emotional chorus. I saw the faces of angels smiling down at me, gracing me with their warmth. My heart swelled with love.

I almost skipped off to work the next morning. I came off the elevator into Hell and saw Dorothy. She looked...well, terrible. Whereas usually her hair was done in an elaborate style and in a color dyed to contrast with her skin color of the day, today her skin was a mottled blue and her hair was gray. She looked like a giant bruise.

"Dorothy, is everything all right?" I asked. Maybe she was sick.

"Fynn. Oh, my, it's just been crazy around here." She leaned forward conspiratorially and whispered, "A demon escaped last night."

I stared at her for a second. I didn't think demons could escape Hell. Isn't it where they belong or something? "How...how does a demon escape?"

She looked puzzled. "I'm not sure, but it has sure thrown management into a tizzy, I can tell you. Demons can cause all sorts of problems. If a demon escapes and gets to earth, it has some plan, and not a good one."

I mulled that over. Wouldn't a demon be noticeable if it escaped? I thought of the afreets, and then of all the demons I had met. I couldn't imagine any of them blending into polite society, or impolite society.

Distracted, I waved to Dorothy and went to SD. I saw Tom and Sierra were working with me today. Thank goodness, no Audrey. I opened my first box of souls and started sorting them, all the while pretty much just counting down the minutes until lunch. It took forever and was like time had stopped. I had always sorted souls; I would always be sorting souls. It would go on forever.

Naturally, it didn't, and eventually lunchtime arrived. I went to the break room. No Lily. Figuring she was late or something, I got myself a protein bar and soda, sat down, and starting munching. A few minutes went by, and still no Lily. I knew sometimes Admissions fell behind if there were a lot of people

that entered Hell at once. So I waited. And waited. We only got nine minutes for lunch, so when eight minutes had gone by I decided to check to see if Lily had gone to the cafeteria instead.

Hell's cafeteria is a large oval room with different serving stations. There was one for salads, one for sandwiches, and one for the hot meal of the day. Today was Tuesday, so that meant meatloaf. I glanced around the seating area, but I didn't see Lily.

Of course, it wasn't that unusual that I didn't see her at work. She had explained to me once that Admissions had a rotating lunch schedule, so sometimes she went early and sometimes she went later. We didn't always have the same break period. Still, we'd just had a date last night, and you'd think she'd try to talk to me or something. Maybe dating was different in Nebraska.

From time to time, the Hornissens poked their heads in, looking for the escaped demon. I guess they were thinking it didn't really escape but was hiding somewhere. Hell's security task force, the Hornissens, was the biggest, scariest bunch of prison guards ever. They were each over seven feet tall, with long faces that ended in pincer jaws. They would use these to rip apart any demon or dead person foolish enough to try to escape. They had hulking shoulders, massive chests, and they carried bandoleers strapped across their torsos. They traveled in groups of three and marched with military precision. You could hear them coming by the "click, click, click" of their jaws beating a rhythm in the hallways. They were terrifying.

Honestly, though, I didn't give them much thought. They marched by a few times, and I just kept my head down and continued working. After all, I personally was not an escaped demon, and I didn't know of any escaped demons. I was mostly wondering where Lily went and when I would see her again. The inner workings of Hell were above my station.

Finally, 6:00 p.m. rolled around. My shoulders were stiff from bending over the packing table all day. I rolled them out a little, but they were like boulders. Walking to the elevator, I looked over my shoulder now and then to see if Lily was around. When I got to the elevator, three Hornissens were stationed there. I moved to get by them, and one of them stopped me with an insect-like claw on my shoulder. Then they frisked me, which made no sense to me. Did they think I stuck a demon in my pocket?

Once that was over I went home, a little dejected. I thought Lily and I had a really good time yesterday, but maybe she didn't think so? She said she would see me today, didn't she? But then where was she?

I trudged out of the high school and started my walk home. So far this summer I had put most of my money away, only spending a little bit here and



there on fast food and a few random things. I had been thinking of all the places I could show Lily if I had a car. We could go down to the beach I always went to when I was a kid. There were acres and acres of smooth, grassy fields where we used to picnic, and then there was the beach and the salty waves and the marshland. I used to try to catch crabs in the shallow waters, putting them into my yellow plastic pail and keeping them until it was time to go home. Then I would gently let them go. They seemed happy, waving their claws around, probably waving to their families and friends, “Here I am! I’m back!”

I could show her the summer carnival they had every year in Bradford. The smell of fried dough and cotton candy coming down the midway. Dozens of kids, small ones walking around with their parents, wide-eyed with wonder. Teenagers laughing with their friends, holding giant plushes they won at ring toss and the water gun races.

I walked the rest of the way home, feeling a little sorry for myself. I turned over every aspect of our date. Had I said something wrong? I looked for clues in her behavior, but I came up with nothing. She seemed to have fun. Maybe not as much fun as I did, but fun.

I pushed through the front door. Mom was sitting on the couch in the living room, watching Maddie play with her xylophone. Someone who clearly doesn’t like us gave it to her for her birthday.

“Hi, Sweetie. There’s chicken and stuffing in the crock pot if you’re hungry,” mom said.

“Thanks.” I was starving. As I was heaping a large portion of chicken onto my plate, my phone pinged. I finished scooping, took my phone out, and looked at it. It was a text—from Lily. She hadn’t forgotten me!

*Hey, sorry I didn’t see you at work. I had to call in sick. See you soon?*

My heart soared. I couldn’t type fast enough.

“For sure! Feel better.”

I was so relieved that I celebrated by eating two helpings of dinner and then finishing up with ice cream.

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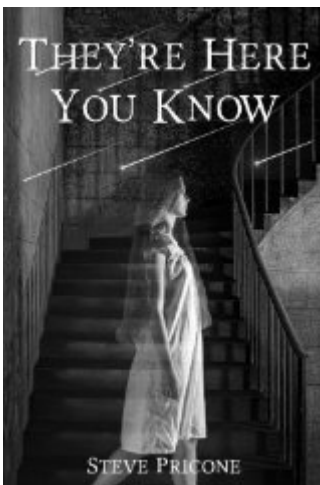
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### **Guardian's Return**

*Darren Simon*

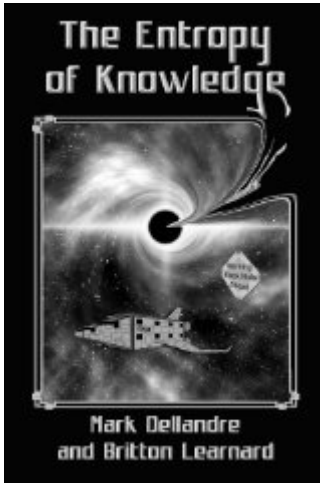
Theodora lives, and if Charlee's dreams of death and fields of spilled blood are true, her great aunt has avenged herself on that world across the dimensional divide. Charlee knows what she must do. Can Charlee defeat Theodora—for good—or will evil consume her? Can she even survive so far from home? Her only hope may rest in the Dragon Lord, but that beast turned his back on her grandfather long ago...



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**The Entropy of Knowledge**  
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We've all had moments when we felt like we were surrounded by idiots... Babylon Briggs feels that pain every day because his town, his planet, even his galaxy, is jam-packed with the most thick-headed simpletons imaginable. When his home world is invaded by a group of equally clueless conquerors, it's up to Babylon to save the day. The only question:

Is he smart enough?



*The book said that demons usually served Satan and carried out his evil wishes against humans. "A demon needs to feed on something in order to live outside of Hell." I read on. "The Succubus is a female demon who steals men's souls through sexual intercourse." Wait, what? I read it again. "Repeated exposure to the succubus would lead to sickness, madness, and death." Well, that didn't sound good at all. Assuming Lily even was a demon. The book said that demons ruled in Hell. I hadn't seen Lily in Hell in weeks. Although I did meet her there. And they had no record of her actually working there. And there had been an escaped demon...*

*Crap.*

Fynn Hardin is an average, everyday high school slacker, voted most likely to be overlooked. He needs a summer job, a car, and a girlfriend, not necessarily in that order. If he doesn't find a summer job, not only will there be no car or girlfriend in his future, but he'll also have to watch his fifteen-month-old sister for the summer—a toddler voted most likely to destroy a playground. After sleeping through the high school job fair, he stumbles upon an elevator to Hell—and Hell is hiring! Fynn gets a job and even meets the girl of his dreams. Lily is charming, beautiful, and she plays video games! What could possibly go wrong? Unfortunately, Lily is also demon that Fynn accidentally helps to escape Hell. Now, Lily is trying to suck the soul out of his body, and Lucifer wants his demon back...



*About the Author:* Gail Kellner lives in Massachusetts with her two young adult sons who are on the autism spectrum, and her husband, who says he is not on the spectrum. She has never actually worked in Hell, but she's had a few jobs that were close. She is the person who goes upstairs to read at parties.



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